



# Risk and Resilience in Agriculture

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## Ranching and Farming With Family Members

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*"My mom and dad homesteaded the place, and they have trouble letting me handle things the way I think I should. After six years at Colorado State in agronomy, you'd think they'd have some confidence in what I think. They just can't seem to let go." –35-year-old farmer*

Two-generation agricultural families are defined as an older generation with fathers or mothers actively involved in the operation of the farm or ranch together with a younger generation consisting of adult children and their spouses. Few businesses other than farming or ranching and some family-owned businesses have as much family involvement in the day-to-day operation.

In North America, farming and ranching are two of the few remaining occupations that involve entire families. While there is no current data, we do know that in 1972, "approximately 95 percent of all commercial farms in the

United States were owned and operated by families" (Nikolitch, 1972 and cited in Capener and Berkowitz, 1976). Farm or ranch, home, and family are components of a dynamic system filled with every day opportunities and challenges for husbands, wives, children and grandparents. Based on conversations with a number of knowledgeable specialists and farm and ranch families, we estimate that over half of the 27,152 farm and ranch operations in Colorado (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1994) have intergenerational conflicts. The root of many financial problems is a serious communication or relationship problem. For example, a grown son may still be angry with his dad for whipping him as a boy. A wife may be unhappy living on the ranch or farm. Sometimes brothers cannot stand each other and have very different approaches to handling the operation.

Often efforts to reach economic goals are blocked by unresolved issues when agricultural operations involve two or more generations. This is due in part to different ages, life experiences, beliefs, needs and wants. Building skills in communication, goal-setting, decision-making, role negotiation, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and strategic planning can help families enhance their relationship and

trust level. Not only can they agree on a shared vision with shared economic and social goals, but they also can develop the team effort. A team effort can help accomplish a shared family vision that can increase net profitability.

### What happens when two or more generations farm or ranch together?

Most two-generation farm and ranch families operate successfully. Things can go smoothly. However, some families experience misunderstandings, misinterpretations and conflict. For example, an in-law may feel like a low-paid hired hand who cannot risk disagreeing with parental decisions. Or, siblings who played well as children no longer see eye-to-eye on the way things should get done. Issues can arise between a sister and brother due to the male tradition that allows the boy to make the big decisions.

Colman and Capener (1986) wrote that many researchers assume that operating a farm is like operating any other business: "Agricultural economists have argued that farms are or should be operated exclusively as businesses in which performance is evaluated by profit returned." (p. 6)

One woman recently said, "If our operation was like a business, we could fire one or two of our family members—but we can't!" Based on a 15-year Cornell study of how 33 farm families make decisions, Colman and Capener (1986) conclude that while "farms are indeed operated as businesses, because production is closely related to the life cycle of the family, the farm, in organization and management, is remarkable, if not unique, among

businesses in developed economies" (p. 6).

### Stressors

Several studies have focused on stressors faced by farm families. Weigel (1981; 1982) identified both farm operational stressors (machinery breakdown, disease outbreak, accidents, and government regulations) and farm family stressors (child turning 13 and caring for an aging parent). Rising health care costs are an emerging issue for Coloradans. Weigel and Weigel (1987) found that the most frequently occurring stressor of two-generation farm families in Iowa was living with "tight money." For sons-in-laws and daughters-in-laws, another frequently reported stressor was not being on one's own. For mothers and fathers, the most frequently reported stressor was taking responsibility for risks and disagreements over spending. A frequently reported stressor for daughters-in-law and mothers was "not being a part of the operation."

In another study, Weigel and Weigel (1990) examined the family satisfaction levels of 242 senior generation farmers and 239 junior generation farmers. They write: "...neither generation is happy with the communication in their two-generation farm family. Items such as handling arguments, fair criticism and family problem solving were ranked low by both groups" (p. 454).

One of the most stressful inter-generational farming issues is the transfer of the family farm from one generation to the next (Anderson and Rosenblatt, 1985; Russell, Griffin, Flinchbaugh, Martin, and Atilano, 1985; Weigel and Weigel, 1990).

### Coping Strategies

According to Anderson and Rosenblatt (1985), critical coping strategies for successful managing of the transfer of the family farm are: open communication among family members (both generations) about the transfer plans; allow feelings to be expressed and acknowledged, and plan early. Ideally, the three-phase transfer process identified by Keating and Munro (1989) (labor, management, and land) occurs gradually as both generations are

ready (Bennett and Kohl, 1982). Frequently, however, one generation is ready to transfer before the other (Salamon, Gengenbacher, and Penas, 1986; Weigel, and Weigel, 1987). This raises the "issues of power, control, decision making, resource allotment, and family unity [which] can all influence the satisfaction of family members during the transfer process" (Weigel and Weigel, 1990, p. 453).

Schumm and Bollman (1981) "found that the families who were able to communicate about needs, desires, and future possibilities were able to... [make] the smooth transition of the farm operation from the parents to the children over a period of years. Communication, common goals, and limited conflict of loyalties all help preserve the sense of unity in two-generation farm families" (Weigel and Weigel, 1990, p. 450).

Weigel (1980; 1981) surveyed northeast Iowa farm family members (230 men and 89 women) and reported that successful stress managers were aware of their strengths, skills, and weaknesses, practiced time management and goal-setting techniques, involved themselves in hobbies and recreation, utilized their support systems, and practiced a variety of stress-management techniques—relaxation, exercise, problem solving and assertiveness—both when in the stress response and when not.

One of the best coping strategies for managing intergenerational stressors is open communication. Open communication involves all family members using active listening skills. Active listening means before a second person says what is on her or his mind, they summarize what the first person

said—both what they said and how they felt—and check out that she or he heard them accurately. E.g., "Sounds like you are frustrated with how inadequate our estate plan is, right?" A Fact Sheet you can order with tips for enhancing open communication is "Dealing with couples' anger (Fact Sheet 10.238) (Fetsch & Jacobson, 1995). It is available from "The Other Bookstore" Cooperative Extension Resource Center, 115 General Services Bldg., Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-4061, <[www.colostate.edu/depts/CoopExt/](http://www.colostate.edu/depts/CoopExt/)>.

In a New York State longitudinal study of 20 farm families, those with low stress levels were found: to use an open (rather than closed) communication style; to make decisions democratically (rather than in an authoritarian manner), and; to plan ahead for stressors that accompany particular stages in the family life cycle (rather than react day-to-day) (Hedlund and Berkowitz, 1978; 1979; Hedlund, Berkowitz, and Bennett, 1980).

Several studies have focused on effective coping strategies farm families use to cope with various stressors. Rosenblatt and Keller (1983) report that major coping mechanisms used by farm couples facing economic hardship were: becoming aware of blaming each other, reducing blaming, and shifting negative perceptions of loss to more positive meanings. Berkowitz and Perkins (1984) found that the more dairy farm husbands were involved in the home, the more supported wives felt. The authors suggest that "the quality of relationships within the family and the social support provided by them may be a more important component of the stress experience than actual role duties or the relationship between roles" (Berkowitz and Perkins, 1984, p. 164). Marotz-Baden and Colvin (1986) reported that often-used coping strategies of rural wives and husbands are "reframing" and "seeking spiritual support." In a study of coping strategies used by two-generation farm families to cope with the stress of intergenerational farm transfer, Russell, Griffin, Flinchbaugh, Martin, and Atilano (1985) reported individual coping and discussion skills were the

strategies used most by all family members, and the next most used coping strategy by daughters-in law was expression of anger and by fathers and mothers was use of professionals. Weigel and Weigel (1987) identified the most frequently reported coping strategy farm family members used to handle the regular challenges of two-generation farm family living was "having faith in God" (p. 381). Fetsch (1987) in a study of Kentucky farmers reported that 90 percent relied on faith. Other important coping strategies that Weigel and Weigel (1987) found were: being flexible, encouraging each other, acceptance, problem analysis, visiting friends, physical activity, outside interests, family meetings, help from professionals, and avoidance of problems.

### Recommendations

Weigel and Weigel (1987) recommend that two-generation farm families be offered education on "communication skills, conflict resolution, problem-solving, decision making, ... [and] goal setting" (p. 384) over extended time periods. Of particular note is the strong recommendation that farm families who anticipate a transfer of the farm to the next generation plan early for the transfer and maintain open communication throughout the process (Anderson and Rosenblatt, 1985). Ballard-Reisch and Weigel (1991) advise family life educators and Cooperative Extension agents "to work with family members to help them identify areas of contention and... [help them develop] communication skills that will allow them to negotiate satisfying outcomes. This may involve basic skills training including communication,

problem solving, and decision making..." (p. 230).

### Practical Strategies

The reason some intergenerational ranching and farming families have trouble reaching their economic goals is due to undeveloped foundational skills. Sometimes a family's effort to decide on shared financial goals fails. They may be stuck like one woman's family: "We hash over issues for hours and hours and they never get resolved. We don't agree on a direction or a plan, so we just go on doing what we did before and stay mad at each other." Sometimes before the generations can come to a consensus on family financial goals or before they work together to achieve them without sabotage, they need to brush up on their skills in communication, trust-building, problem-solving, negotiation, goal-setting, and strategic planning.

Some practical strategies intergenerational farming and ranching families can experiment with are as follows:

1. **Write down your personal, family, and work goals** for three months, six months, and a lifetime. Many people have found it helpful to purchase and use a copy of *Time Management for Busy People* (Fetsch, 1991).
2. Make time to **sit and think**. Know what you want and need for your well being. Practice healthy stress management strategies. Consider asking your Colorado State University Cooperative Extension agent for Fact Sheet 10.201, *Farming, ranching: Health hazard or opportunity* (Fetsch, 1990).
3. **Deal well with unfinished business with others**. Ask your Colorado State University Cooperative Extension agent for Fact Sheet 10.214, *Transitions and changes: Practical strategies for making new beginnings* (Quick, Fetsch, and Rupured, 1991).
4. **Enhance your communication and negotiation skills**. Use fewer "You" statements ("You never come to meals on time") and more "I" statements ("When you're late for a meal I feel angry.") Experiment with the following "I" statement: When you \_\_\_\_\_ (describe the behavior),

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ (irritated, angry, sad, depressed, etc.). What I want from you is \_\_\_\_\_ (describe the behavior). What I'm willing to do is \_\_\_\_\_ (and negotiate mutually satisfying solutions). Also, check out what the other person heard you say: "Would you tell me what you heard me say?"

5. **Ask your Colorado State University Cooperative Extension agent about family meetings.** You might ask your Cooperative Extension agent for Fact Sheet 10.249, *Manage anger through family meetings* (Fetsch & Jacobson, 1996).
6. **Reflect with your family on when you solved problems well.** Think back to when either your family or another family solved a problem well. What worked? What didn't? Make a list of successful strategies.
7. If your family problems are too complex to solve yourselves, **seek professional help.** Although farming and ranching families may have to drive several miles to a larger city, the help you get may save you much pain and money. Look in the yellow pages of your telephone book or ask friends about confidential, effective counselors, marriage and family therapists, psychologists, mental health practitioners, social workers, or pastoral counselors.

## References

A more complete list of references is available from the author on request: Robert J. Fetsch, Extension Specialist, Human Development and Family Studies, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523.

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